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Service Learning: Transforming Students, Communities and Universities

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Abstract

Service Learning uses community service as the vehicle for the achievement of specific academic goals and objectives. This paper is the first in a series of papers, dedicated to research and practice of service learning in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. In this paper, I introduce the concept of Service Learning by looking back at thirty years of research and practice of SL to revisit some of its basic principles. Taking into consideration, the early developments of SL in Malaysia, this paper concludes with views on why tertiary institutions in Malaysia would greatly benefit by incorporating SL into their courses.

Keywords: Service Learning, tertiary education, experiential learning, reflection

1. Introduction

Service Learning (herewith referred to as **SL**) is "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" [1]. As explained by Benson et al. [2], it is an approach to bridge the gap between institutions of higher learning and society by increasing civic engagement in students and narrowing the distance between universities and communities. SL has become widely practiced in America with involvement from schools and higher learning institutions and in recent years, it has further developed as part of tertiary education around the globe. In Malaysia, SL practice is still at its infancy, with some tertiary institutions incorporating it as co-curricular activities, outreach programs and community initiatives. How far these programs reflect SL principles, is something we need to look into, as studies have shown that while many institutions may claim that

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they are running SL programs, not all would adhere to 'real' guidelines of what makes it SL in practice. In this paper, we discuss Service Learning by revisiting some of its basic features and evidence from research and practice of Service Learning. This includes its background, characteristics, and other key features that explain the reasons for SL's widespread practice and success. The paper concludes with a brief view of why SL would greatly benefit tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

2. Service Learning Defined

Defining SL has indeed been a challenge. From the time it was conceptualised, the term has been used to characterise a wide array of experiential educational endeavours, from volunteer and community service projects to field studies and internship programs [3]. Sigmon [4] originally defined SL as an experiential approach that is premised on reciprocal learning. He suggested that since the learning came out of the service, both parties (those doing service and those receiving) would learn from the experience. Over the years, SL has been characterised in various ways. Kendall et al., [5] reviewed 147 different terms and definitions related to SL and concluded that in general, the various definitions can be grouped into specific categories, i.e. SL as a kind of education, a philosophy, and even a phenomenon. Over the years, SL has been described as a movement and a field [6], pedagogy [7], a learning technique [8], and even as a teaching technique [9].

Marullo [10] views SL as a pedagogy that offers 'a crucible for learning by enabling students to test theories with life experiences, thus forcing upon them an evaluation of their knowledge and understanding grounded in their service experience'. Strage [11] points out that SL contains three essential elements, whereby students learn course content as they serve their community, and reflect on the connections between explicit course content and their experiences in the field. In a similar vein, Belenky et al., [13] see SL as a form of experiential learning. Bringle and Hatcher [14] provide a more comprehensive definition of SL as a:

> credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity in such a way that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p.112)

These definitions suggest that SL is viewed as a method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organised service experiences. These experiences meet actual community needs and are integrated into the students' academic curriculum and/or provide structured time for reflection to enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community [1].

Based on these definitions, SL can be distinguished from other community based practices such as volunteerism, community service and internship. Furco [3] makes a clear distinction of the differences between SL and other forms of experiential learning that involve community service (see Figure 1).

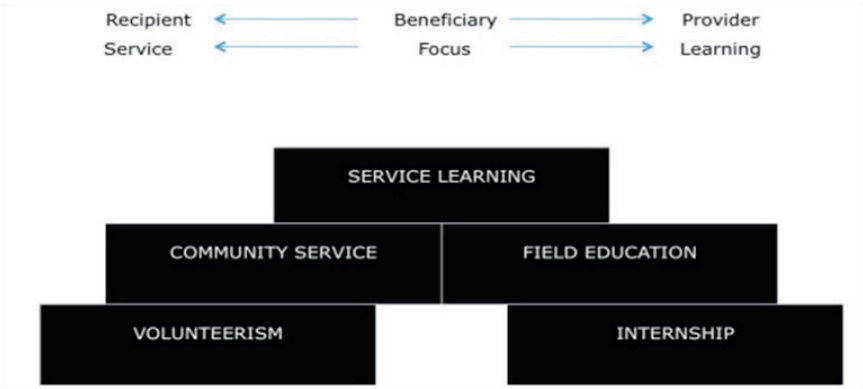

Figure 1 — Distinctions among Service Based Programmes [3]

For Furco, SL focuses equally on learning and service where the provider and recipient benefit equally from the partnership. In contrast, volunteerism is the engagement of students in activity with the primary concern being the service provided and the service recipient. Volunteers thus are 'people who perform some service or good work of their own free will and without pay' [15]. Some examples include a school based program in which student volunteers visit the local hospital to sit with Alzheimer patients. More emphasis is thereby given to the organisation rather than the volunteers' learning (but this is not to say that learning does not happen). A student volunteering to sit with Alzheimer patients may or may not necessarily learn about the illness or its conditions or of other issues concerning senior citizens. SL on the other hand provides 'critical reflection' to help students learn about these issues.

Community service is also different from SL as it involves action taken to meet the needs of others and better the community as a whole [1]. The primary concern for community service is in the service being provided and the benefits for the recipients with students learning about how they can make a difference in others' lives. This implies charity [3]. Some examples include recycling or helping residents at a senior home. Internship is the other common community based practice whereby students are engaged in service activities with the primary focus being, giving students hands-on experience to enhance the academic content. Host organisations benefit from hosting interns but the main emphasis is student-learning about their jobs, organisations etc. While the benefit to the community is important, it is only secondary [3]. Student placements at companies and corporations and industrial training are some examples of internships.

3. Basic characteristics of Service-Learning

Such differences mentioned above, set SL apart from other community based programs. Despite that, in recent years, much research has been done to bring about an even better understanding and especially to develop a more structured methodology for effective SL practices. Albeit the many definitions (stated above), effective SL practices should adhere to some common standards and indicators [1]. The general characteristics that define effective SL practice are discussed in the following paragraphs.

3.1. Integrating Service with Course Content Structure

A SL programme must mirror course content [14] in that it must have some academic context and be designed in a way that would enhance both the service and the learning [3]. A good example of this is when a group of students majoring in Physical Education, research and teach programs and create campaigns/competitions for elders at a care-home. This basically means that their service experience has clear learning goals that are aligned with their programme/curriculum, while at the same time, enabling them to provide a service to the target community. Their service involves the implementation of activities that combine classroom learning with meeting real community needs. The service experience thus, becomes a means of integrating theory to practice and helps learners transfer knowledge and skills studied to real community needs. Research shows that linking service to curriculum goals indicated stronger academic outcomes [16, 17], and also led to better mastery of knowledge and skills in comparison to non-service learning courses [18].

3.2. Incorporating Reflection into Service-Learning Courses

Reflection is described as the hyphen in service-learning and viewed as the link that ties student experience in the community to academic learning [19]. As SL relies on the experience of service, it is a form of experiential learning, which relates to 'learning by doing'. This is based on Dewey's [12] principles of experiential learning [11]. For Dewey [12] reflective thinking is the key to making experience educative 'where reflection leads to understanding, which in turn leads to more informed action'. Put simply, experiential learning follows the process of 'Action Reflection –Action' [19]. For a scientific understanding of how reflection links service to learning, scholars have turned to Kolb's [20] model of the experiential learning cycle that is based on principles of Dewey's experiential learning. Kolb sees learning as a process involving a cycle with four stages. Giles et al., [19] elaborate on the principles of experiential cycle, and this also explains Kolb's experiential learning model.

> 'The learner performs some action then reflects on the outcome of that action, making observations and developing explanations, and finally, the learner repeats the action phase, this time testing the observations or explanations developed during reflection. The result is a cyclical process, during which each action cycle is transformed as a result of plans and observations developed during the previous reflection cycle; and each reflection cycle expands the learner's world view based on observations from the previous action phase.' [19]

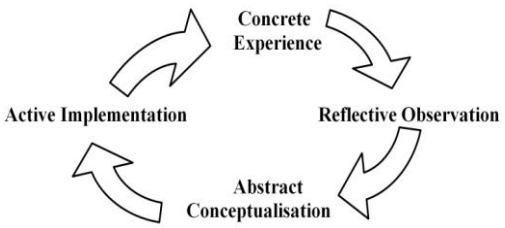

Figure 2: Kolb's model of experiential learning cycle [19]

Figure 2 illustrates the four stages of the cycle. SL practitioners and researchers alike have acknowledged the importance of reflection through 'structured opportunities' that lead to the most effective service-learning experiences. Structured opportunities for learners enable them to critically reflect upon their service experiences, thus helping them to examine and form their beliefs, values, opinions, assumptions, attitudes and practices. The learners' reflection relates to an action or experience to gain a deeper understanding of them and construct their

own meaning and significance for future actions [19]. Connors and Seifer [22], [1], further explain the reflection process via their version of the experiential learning cycle (Figure 3).

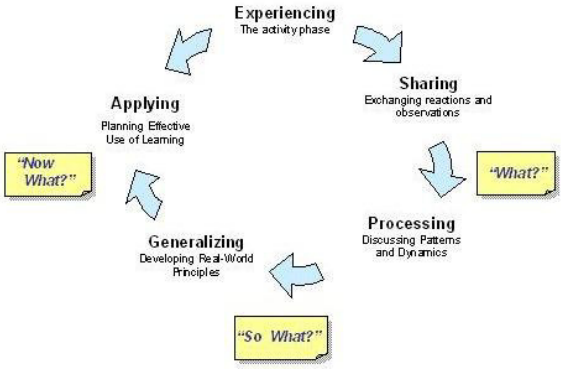

Figure 3: The Experiential Learning Cycle 1

The process involves the four stages of experiencing-sharing-generalising-applying. It begins with a defining and sharing of the ***"What?"*** of the students' experience and follows a continuous cycle towards ***"So What?"*** and ***"Now What?".*** Answers to the ***what***, ***so what*** and ***now what*** questions are tied together to form a comprehensive and integrated discovery and learning cycle for the student throughout the duration of a service-learning experience [19], [1]. Reflection which is a crucial element of this cycle, according to Bringle and Hatcher [7], symbolises the intentional thinking or consideration of an experience in relation to particular learning objectives. Experience can be 'mis-educative' if it merely serves to reinforce a participant's assumptions and stereotypes. It is through critical reflection/thought that new meaning is created, this is what leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions [7]. In this sense, reflection "facilitates the students' making connections between their service and their learning experience" [8]. Thus, it is critical reflection in SL that provides the transformative link between the action of *serving* and the ideas and understanding of learning [2]. For this purpose, feedback is important to promote critical thinking and give students the opportunity to view things from different perspectives [24].

In SL, reflection can be incorporated by building in structured time into the lessons/ service experiences to enable students to review their service and learning before, during and after the service experience (pre, while and post-service stages). This is done by integrating reflection activities on a continuous basis, based on the context, level and type of course. The reflective tasks must be connected to the learning objectives to prompt deeper thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to the society. The tasks therefore must challenge students to think critically about their service experience. As such, these can be in any form such as verbal, written and artistic, and non-verbal activities to demonstrate understanding and changes in students' knowledge, skills, beliefs, values and/or attitude [17]. These reflective tasks form the main element of SL pedagogy. The activities can vary depending on the learners' age, level and scope of the learning goals.

Various studies have evinced the importance of reflection activities in SL courses. Blyth et al., [23] state how young people who did not engage in reflection during their service-learning projects, showed lower levels of social responsibility than others. Other studies found that students' engagement in reflection had led to stronger self-confidence and higher levels of social responsibility than those who did not [25]. Reflection also improved students' ability to solve problems and apply learning to real-life situations [6]. Through reflection of their service experience, students showed a more positive attitude towards school and civic responsibilities [16].

3.3. Integrating 'Real' Community Needs into Student-Learning

In SL courses, community service is the vehicle for achieving specific academic goals and objectives. SL activities thus, present an opportunity to enhance classroom content while providing a valued service to the community. But the valued service should be based on 'real' or community needs that exist in society. According to Berger Kaye [26], addressing genuine community needs is a key element of effective SL courses because it gives students' actions greater value and importance. By identifying, learning about and discussing real community needs, students are able to see their actions making a noticeable difference even as they learn and apply academic skills and knowledge [26]. Simoneli et al., [27] point out that service as accompaniment to learning, develops greater understanding of local life, allowing students to gain insider views of marginalised groups. In this way, students feel a sense of responsibility towards the community and develop a greater sense of belonging and civic consciousness [27].

Besides addressing 'real' needs, the service experience should be meaningful or be personally relevant to the students. Furco [3] found that meaningful service led to strongest outcomes as the activities challenged the students and showed increased level of responsibility. The students were kept interested, motivated and committed because they had more control of their service activities. Billig et al., [28] concur that when students perceived their service-learning projects to be meaningful, they were more committed to the project, acquired more skills and knowledge, and developed their own project ideas and a greater sense of efficacy. Outcomes were also highest, when the service activity addressed meaningful issues within their own community [29].

3.4. *Incorporating Reciprocity for Learning and Serving*

Most voluntary and community based service is based on charitable acts of giving and serving. Therefore service is viewed as charity. While charity is about being human and humane, we need to acknowledge the fact that charity is not always about compassion. For one thing, as Gorham [30] explains, charity "disables the civic" and dilutes citizen actions". This hinders citizen development as a force for social change. While charitable acts involve students providing immediate assistance to individuals, it is civic education efforts that lend people power to help clients/ communities help themselves, while also enhancing students' sense of social responsibility [31]. Another failing of charity is the perception the doers of service or volunteers may have of the community being helped. Charity, according to O'Grady and Chappell [32], can express attitudes of *noblesse oblige,* or in other words, paternalism toward less fortunate (and less capable) others. This latter motivation, according to them, can hinder a public, collective sense of "we." In addition, Sandaran [33] explains that such paternal sentiments can lead to the 'demoralising of the communities' that are being helped. Through a constant reference to their privileged positions both in status and knowledge/expertise, volunteers are likely to construct an elite identity, thus ascribing to asymmetrical relationships of power between those serving and receiving/being served [33].

Another drawback of community service is that the community being served can be viewed as not just lacking in resources, but also in knowledge and expertise [34]. SL scholars strongly advocate university- community partnerships to view the community as possessing knowledge and assets, such that the university and community can work together to co-create solutions to social problems [35]. As SL looks upon service as civic engagement and not charity, its focus on reciprocity, or the win-win situation of all parties working together and benefiting together, can provide opportunities for students to explore and gain deeper understanding about service and develop a more mature and respectful relationship between service providers and those receiving.

A good example of the reciprocal relationship in SL experience is when a group of teacher -trainees of English as a Second Language (TESL) engage in service in a non-English speaking community. The TESL trainees may spend time tutoring children in the community to speak English, and this provides them with an opportunity to practise their English language teaching skills (pedagogy) with the children and their families. Such experiences

make SL a reciprocal practice because both volunteers (students) and the people being served benefit together through the service activity. In this way, SL combines service to the community with student learning in a way that improves both the student and the community. Such reciprocal relationships can foster a symbiotic, co-relational existence rather than charity where knowledge moves one-way, i.e. from volunteers to the community. This allows both the community and volunteers/students to have equal say in co-defining social problems and co-creating solutions [36]. d'Arlach et al., [34] aptly explain this relationship whereby SL advocates an epistemology that makes knowledge local where it becomes co-created with (rather than for) the community.

3.5 Working with Community Partners for Serving and Learning

In SL, building communities involves an important partnership between educational institutions, businesses and organisations. Figure 4 illustrates this mutually benefiting relationship between university, community partners and community, with each playing key roles to develop and ascertain the success of the relationship.

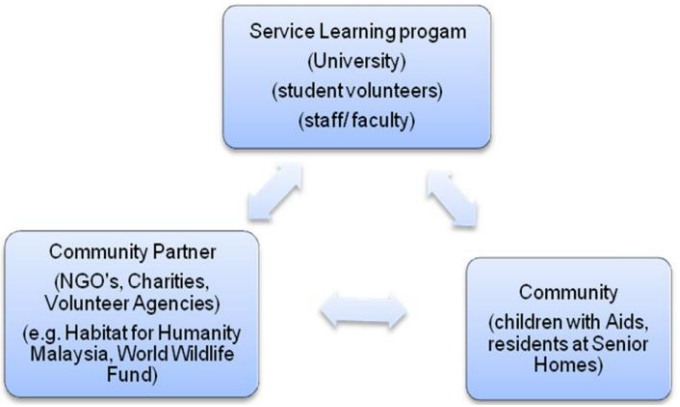

Figure 4: Mutually benefiting relationships between Community Partners, University and Community through SL courses [34]

In this mutually benefiting relationship, the university SL program through faculty, manages and oversees all academic and administrative issues pertaining to the service experience and curriculum. This includes determining course learning objectives to reflect a specific project that benefits all involved. The community becomes a part of the relationship equation in terms of goals and objectives for the learning and service experience [36]. The term 'Community' can vary geographically and socially depending on the nature of the service activity, such as the university campus itself when the activity involves improving conditions within the campus, e.g. students undertake research of existing facilities for students that need improvements. The community can also extend beyond the campus such as the local neighbourhood, city or region, e.g. students working in a care home for the elderly or tutoring children at an orphanage. Linking the community with the university is the Community Partner.

The term 'Community Partner' is used to refer to partner groups that work together with faculty as they mediate between university and the target community by identifying community needs in relation to SL course objectives and projects. These groups can involve community-based organisations such as charities, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGO's), and other public institutions (such as schools) that help identify specific local needs and thereby define community-based projects and also host students. Community Partners act as 'co-educators', facilitators and trainers who work with faculty to identify the service site, recruit, train and mentor students to provide them with specific skills needed for the project. They also support student-learning by monitoring and supervising students at service sites. Thus, they need to be included in all stages of SL programmes, i.e. from planning, implementation and assessment of service learning projects. In this sense,

SL is a shared collaborative process and reflection on service brings about the sense of a learning community whereby both the university and partner agencies contribute strengths and assets to and benefit from the project [37]. In fact, SL makes provisions for not just the involvement of students and learning institutions, every level of the society, including the communities being served, can be involved in the mutually benefiting equation of SL. This is illustrated in Figure 5 which is based on an ethnographic study of SL communities in America between 2003 and 2005 by the author [33].

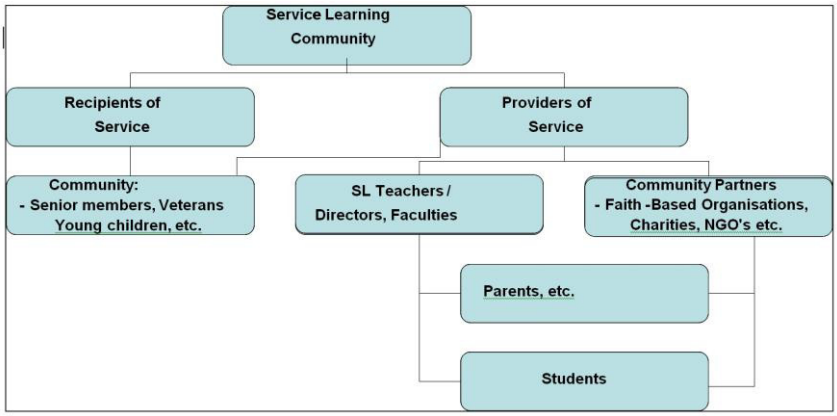

Figure 5: Partnerships in SL Community [33]

4. Examples of SL Activities

The characteristics discussed above are some guidelines for effective and best SL practices based on research and documentation of SL practice over thirty years. In incorporating such characteristics, SL activities can take many forms. According to Berger-Kaye [26], the service component of SL can be classified in the following ways:

- ***Direct service*** involving both volunteers (students) and community (recipients) through face-to-face interactions. Here, those performing service visit the service site and have first-hand experience with the community being served. Examples include tutoring younger children or working with the elderly;
- ***Indirect service*** involving volunteers serving not individuals but a community or the environment as a whole. Examples include restoring a park or community centre;
- ***Advocacy*** that aims to create awareness or promote action and understanding about an issue of public interest. Examples include writing letters, public speaking, performing a play; and
- ***Research*** involving students in finding, gathering, reporting on information of public interest. Examples include students undertaking surveys, or formal studies and experiments, and then reporting the findings to the public. (p.9)

Taking on these different classifications of service, what then do SL activities look like? The National Service Learning Clearinghouse offers a comprehensive description of what an ideal SL task or activity should be:

> 'Picking up trash by a riverbank is service. Studying water samples under a microscope is learning. When students collect and analyze water samples and the local pollution centre uses the findings to clean up a river... that is service learning. [1]

Another example of SL courses include the following [1]:

- ***Students of Education Technology or Computer Science*** spend afternoons or weekends teaching senior citizens how to use computers. As teaching senior citizens computer technology requires a different approach, students will be developing specific lesson plans to instruct their elders. They will focus on basic computer skills that match the interest of the senior citizens. Here students will brainstorm possible topics (e.g. basic skill examples: Microsoft Office – Word, Excel & PowerPoint, how to Google, familiarise menu documents, folders, "layering", use of a mouse, organising and sharing pictures, etc.). [1]

These examples of courses with SL integration provide students with experience in real-world application of concepts and theories that would allow them to see that application of theory is not always straightforward or as prescribed in the books. In addition, the work will take place within non-profit/ community based organisations that will expose students to the realities of community service and to community needs. It will also bring to light the professional and ethical issues inherent in their work.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed some of the basic building blocks of SL that have made it a widely practiced 'university – community' initiative which is gaining grounds around the globe. With over thirty years of research to evince the success of SL and the multitude of benefits to faculty, community and students, incorporating SL into Malaysian tertiary education could assist tertiary level institutions to build sustainable partnerships with communities, reassert their relevance and social responsibility to society and produce graduates of high quality who are able to meet the demands of both local and global markets. For faculty members, SL could enable them to integrate theory and practice with community needs. In this way, SL would assist Malaysian universities to achieve their goals for becoming centres of excellence and produce outstanding graduates and citizens. With SL being so widely practiced in America, starting a course in our institutions need not be as challenging due to the large extent of resource materials and ideas that have been made available to us by scholars that can be found in various websites and resource banks e.g. [1]. What this means is that, there really is no need for us to reinvent the wheel. From ideas for implementation, curriculum, assessment and even reflection that have been researched and evinced by scholars, these websites provide us with the 'A-Z' of SL practice. Malaysian tertiary education should thus take advantage of these resources and make SL part of its curriculum. At present, it can be said that the potential of SL as a means for educating youth to become engaged citizens has yet to be explored and 'exploited' in Malaysia.

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